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ABSTRACT

Advocating the case study method as a valuable learning tool in the study of interpersonal relationships, this paper discusses how case studies can be used as the major research project in interpersonal communication classrooms, requiring students to study the communication of an ongoing relationship for the course of the semester. Following a brief explanation of the case study method, the paper presents a detailed explanation of the case study research project, including a description of it, a discussion of research design, an outline of data collection techniques (including observations, interviews, surveys, and artifacts), a description of the final product, and project ground rules. The paper further discusses the advantages and disadvantages of case studies, and concludes that the case study method is an extremely flexible method which allows for a variety of data sources, and which provides detailed information that enhances the understanding of the relationship under study. (SR)

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DESCRIBING AN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP: THE CASE STUDY APPROACH

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In the fall of 1983, a graduate course in Advanced Interpersonal Communication was offered for the first time at Bowling Green State University. This course was taught from the pragmatic approach to relational communication. This approach assumes that the emphasis of study should be on "the behaviors, the actions, performed by the individuals who are members of a communication system" (Fisher, 1978). Additionally, this view (also called the interactional view) defines relational communication as what "goes on between people rather than within them. The focus is on the human system as a whole and not so much on the person within the system" (Fisher, 1981). The major research project in this course was a case study; this required that students study the communication of an ongoing relationship for the course of the semester. While this assignment has evolved over the years, the case study approach is still used in this course.

A similar course was offered for the first time at Pittsburg State University in the fall of 1990. A student from the original class, now the professor, decided to take a similar approach to the course. The case study approach was again introduced, this time to seniors and graduate students.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the particulars of this case study project in the interpersonal classroom, as well as to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the assignment.

THE CASE STUDY METHOD

The case study method is a useful qualitative approach to the study of interpersonal relationships when the goal of the researcher is to understand or explain a phenomenon (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). In the case of this assignment, a particular dyad is chosen as the unit of study. This method of inquiry uses multiple sources of data to investigate the phenomenon in question. These sources will be discussed in greater detail further on.

Four characteristics of the case study method warrant discussion (Merriam, 1988). First, this method requires the study of a particular situation. The situation in the present assignment would be the relationship and its context. Second, the case study provides a detailed description of the people/situation under study. Third, this method helps people to understand what's being studied; new interpretations, new perspectives, new meanings, and fresh insights are the goals. Finally, most case studies rely on inductive reasoning. That is, principles and generalizations about the phenomenon under study emerge from the examination of the particular data.

The explanation of the research project follows. Some design specifics, data collection techniques, and putting together the final product are briefly outlined. Finally, advantages and disadvantages are discussed.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Major Research Project

Description: This project will require you to collect data throughout the semester regarding a dyad you have chosen for study. The data will be assimilated and analyzed in order to describe the nature of that relationship in communication terms. No attempt should be made to predict the future of the relationship, to discuss behaviors in the relationship in terms of cause-effect, or to generalize your findings to other relationships. In addition, it is inappropriate to evaluate behaviors under study as right or wrong, good or bad, harmful or helpful. The goal is to provide a descriptive analysis of the dyad based upon your observations. You will be conducting a case study of the relationship. A case study method involves a comprehensive description and explanation of a particular social situation. In this instance, it will be your chosen dyad. The idea is to learn as much as possible about this one "case"--in the greatest possible detail. Your main focus should be the communication that occurs between the members of this dyad; it is the communication that will reveal patterns of behavior which identify the nature of the relationship. Case studies typically use a variety of methods, including observations, interviews, surveys, and study of artifacts. Each of these methods will be discussed.

Research Design:

The first concern in a case study design is what to analyze and what kinds of questions to ask. You are encouraged to do some initial observations of your dyad before formulating any specific questions. Remember, you are to focus on the communication that occurs between your dyad. In terms of the overall project, however, you should concentrate your efforts in four basic areas. First, you need to observe the communication between the individuals. Second, you need to consider the context, or the system of which the dyad is a part. This may include observing interactions with children, in-laws, other friends, and co-workers. While this may be difficult, you should consider asking your dyad about the people who impact upon their relationship. Other system variables such as economic considerations, religious beliefs, heritage or race, etc. also need to be included. Third, you will need to observe behaviors of the dyad on a regular basis during the course of the semester. Observing behaviors over time should allow you to discover patterns of behavior within the relationship. These patterns may be dictated by rules in the relationship or they may simply be habitual ways of behaving. In any case, these patterns should help you to better understand and explain the nature of that relationship. Finally, you will need to interview your dyad, both as individuals and as a pair. It is important to be able to explain the relationship from the members' point of view.

Data Collection Techniques

Observations: This method requires gathering data through systematic "watching" of the dyad under study, without attempting to

manipulate or control the interactions of the dyad. Your reactions to these observations should be carefully recorded. At first, it may be difficult to decide what is important. Essentially, make a note of anything you think might be helpful in the eventual unerstanding of your dyad.

Interviews: These may be conducted individually and/or as a dyad and may follow some initial observations in order that questions regarding some specific issues may be formulated. We will take time in class to formulate a basic interview structure, but it will be necessary to adapt the questions to your dyad. You may also need to add or delete particular questions to get at the information you think is most relevant.

Surveys: These will be qualitative, or open-ended questions. I will provide you with some questions to get started, and we will also spend time in class to develop additional ideas. A good place to start is to ask each member of your dyad to provide a written description of the relationship. Ask them to do this individually, that is, without collaborating with their partner. Other communication issues to deal with include argument styles, self-disclosure, communicator style, etc.

Artifacts: Artifacts include any objects that may tell you something about the relationship, such as photographs, diaries, etc. These may or may not be available to you. Use your own judgement about asking to study these kinds of objects.

Final Product: The final product will be a 10-15 page typed, double-spaced paper in which you present your analysis of the data you have collected. This analysis will essentially provide a description of the relationship based upon the data as well as your own unique point of view and style of data interpretation. The format of the paper should include the following:

Introduction
Methods of Data Collection
Data Analysis
Discussion
Summary and Conclusion
References
Appendices

The appendices should include any open-ended surveys that you use, interview questions, or other written material given to your dyad. Only the questions themselves should be included, not the answers provided by your dyad. The actual responses should be discussed in the data analysis and discussion sections of your paper.

Project Ground Rules

In the initial phase of this project, you should meet with your dyad in order to establish ground rules for the duration of the project. Some important rules are as follows:

1. Explain to the dyad that while the information they share is not confidential, their identities will remain anonymous.

2. Instruct the dyad that they should not reveal anything to you that they do not want their partner to know, or that they do not want to see in print. In effect, you should not hear anything "off the record."

3. You should be allowed to ask any questions you consider important, but the dyad may at any time decline to answer particular questions.

These ground rules are not all-encompassing; you may need to develop additional ones based upon your particular dyad.

FINAL NOTE: We will have weekly information sharing sessions in class so that you can describe your progress and so that you can benefit from one another's experiences. Please keep the identity of your dyad anonymous at all times.

ADVANTAGES OF CASE STUDIES

Case studies provide detailed information about the phenomenon under study. Data collected provides opportunities for description, explanation, and understanding about not only what is occurring but what it means. This method allows the researcher to collect data from a wide variety of sources, including interviews, artifacts, observations, and surveys. The more variety of data sources used in a case, the more likely the study will be valid. In addition, information learned may generate questions for further study.

DISADVANTAGES OF CASE STUDIES

Three main criticisms of case studies are advanced by Wimmer & Dominick, (1991). First, case studies are considered to lack scientific rigor. Second, case studies are not easily generalizable. Third, they are time-consuming to conduct and sometimes produce mass quantities of data which are difficult to summarize. The first two criticisms seem inappropriate. First, while case studies may not be rigorous in the quantitative sense, if conducted carefully, they can be just as rigorous in a qualitiative sense. Second, case studies are not necessarily conducted in order to generalize to other similar phenomenon. The third criticism is valid, however. Case studies <u>are</u> time-consuming and data is difficult to summarize. This means results may be outdated by the time they are presented or that they may be presented poorly.

Other disadvantages are particularly relevant to this research project. First, because researchers who conduct case studies do not plan all research procedures in advance, it is impossible to provide a step-by-step method for proceeding (Tucker, et al., 1981). That is, it is difficult to tell students exactly how to begin. Many of them find this level of uncertainty uncomfortable, but they become more comfortable as they begin to collect data and as the semester progresses. Second, students are uncomfortable not knowing exactly <u>what</u> to look for in their study of the dyad. Providing sample questions and other ideas for data collection helps, but ultimately they have to make specific decisions about what to look for based upon their particular dyad. Finally, students realize that participant observation has drawbacks. The concern is that their presence somehow influences the behavior of the dyad. While this is no doubt true, students are reminded that this is inherent in participant observation. While this effect may be minimized, it cannot be completely removed, nor should it necessarily be. As Rogers (1987) states: "Events are not transferred to us, but rather, transformed by us. The act of measuring effects the system being measured; the observer is inherently part of the observation, thus observation is necessarily subjective. Paradoxes exist; no complete, consistent, provable, deductive system is possible. The notion of truth is relative; it rests on aesthetic unity, not ultimate cause" (p. 5).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The case study method is a valuable learning tool in the interpersonal communication classroom. It provides students with experience in the use of the method, and helps them to recognize particular communication behaviors which are used to define, maintain, and change the dyadic relationship. In addition, students gain a better appreciation for the interactional perspective. Observations and study of the dyad's communication over a period of time give the student an evolutionary view of the relationship.

While there are disadvantages to the method, including being time-consuming and dealing with large quantities of data, it has advantages as well. It is an extremely flexible method, allows for a variety of data sources, and provides detailed information that enhances the understanding of the relationship under study.

Students will experience some uncertainty in the use of the method, but most feel that having conducted the case study prepares them to use it in the future.

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